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## **Dutch political corruption in historical perspective: From eighteenth century value pluralism to a nineteenth century dominant liberal value system and beyond**

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# Korruption

Historische Annäherungen an eine Grundfigur  
politischer Kommunikation

Herausgegeben von

Niels Grüne und Simona Slanicka

Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht

ger von Paris im Allgemeinen und die der Rentiers im Besonderen, das Grundelement des Mandats der Stadtverwaltung, war gleichzeitig eine Auswirkung und das wesentliche Kennzeichen dieser Korruption. Der erste Fehler der früheren und jetzigen Verantwortlichen im Hôtel de Ville lag in der Zustimmung zu ihrer eigenen Machtlosigkeit, indem sie sich den Neuerungen nicht entgegenstellten hatten, die ihre effektive Macht zur Sicherung der Renten untergraben hatten.

Die Modulationen des Repertoires in der kollektiven Aktion der Rentiers machten die dominierende Überzeugung von einer verallgemeinerten, jede Hingabe an die »utilitas communis« vernichtenden Korruption aktenkundig. Dieser Stigmatisierungsprozess bot einen interpretativen Rahmen, der in den Protesthandlungen der Rentiers eine sehr starke Resonanz fand. Der grundsätzliche Glaube, dass die städtischen Behörden korruptiert und fortan von den einfachen Bürgern durch außerhalb der Zivilgemeinschaft liegende Treupflichten und Interessen getrennt waren, erscheint wie ein grundsätzlicher Motor dieser Änderung der möglichen Aktionspalette der Rentiers. Die im Namen der Letzteren gedruckten Schriften artikulierten die Sehnsucht nach einer teilweise mythisch gewordenen Vergangenheit (das Hôtel de Ville, das früher das »Bessuchzimmer des Bürgers« genannt wurde, die einstige Wahlfreiheit etc.) und denunzierten die Korruption. Sie offenbarten im Detail die Grundlagen der ursprünglichen, doch nun zunichte gemachten Sicherheit der Renten und das der politischen Repräsentation in der Stadt zugrunde liegende, allgemeine Prinzip. Dieses Prinzip beinhalten die Pflicht desjenigen, der das Gemeinwohl vertritt und zu diesem Zweck über Stimme, Autorität und Macht verfügte, für diejenigen zu sprechen und zu handeln, die weder Stimme noch Autorität oder Macht hatten. Hinter der scheinbaren Polphonie der Druckschriften und Aktionsformen der Rentiers tritt eine kraftvolle Linie hervor, die sich konstatierend und präventiv gegen die Korruption richtete, die in das innere Zentrum des zivilen Lebens vorgedrungen war, indem sie die Stadtverwaltung von ihrer Aufgabe zur Repräsentation und Verteidigung des Gemeinwohls der Pariser Bevölkerung abgebracht hatte. Die Versammlungen der Rentiers und ihrer Syndics dokumentierten diese Preisgabe des Gemeinwohls in gewisser Weise, indem sie eine spezifischere Repräsentation aufbauten, eher im Sinne einer Interessengemeinschaft, da begründet aus dem Eigentum an Renten oder Forderungen aus Renten. Weit davon entfernt, einen unzeitgemäßen Diskurs über die Korruption auszugraben, ließen die Stigmatisierungen und Handlungsformen der Rentiers während der Fronde neue Organisationsformen entstehen, die mit der korporativen und repräsentativen Organisation der Stadt brachen.

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## Dutch Political Corruption in Historical Perspective

From Eighteenth-Century Value Pluralism to a Nineteenth-Century  
Dominant Liberal Value System and Beyond

### 1. Introduction

Any understanding of political corruption is inextricably linked to specific conceptions of what constitutes correct ethical conduct for public officials. These, however, change over time. Obviously, much official conduct that was appropriate in times past is no longer acceptable today. This raises certain interesting questions. How much, when, and why do values, assumptions and expectations regarding public official behaviour actually change? What exactly constitutes incorrect or correct public official behaviour in specific historical contexts?

Answers to such questions are dependent on historical insight into corruption. In this article we will attempt to deal with the issue of conceptualizing »political corruption« in a way that does justice to its historical complexity without losing sight of an overall social sciences perspective from which to study the phenomenon. More in particular, we will exemplify an especially promising »neo-classical« approach. We will present two case studies of political corruption from different periods. In our first case, we turn towards the dos and don'ts of eighteenth-century office allocation in the Dutch city of Leiden, and the value pluralism this entailed. Our second case, the Letters Affair of 1865, is about unduly influencing elections and the emergence of a more coherent set of values underlying correct public official behaviour within the Dutch political strife of the mid-nineteenth century.

Both cases differ as to period and theme. However, both reflect times in which old habits and corrupt practices were increasingly questioned and discussed, eventually leading to changes in values underlying correct public administration. Both cases show how corruption can be conceptualized and investigated by way of a neo-classical approach and definition. The cases also demonstrate how political corruption acquires specific meanings in different historical contexts. In this respect it is important to note how in these cases multiple standards of corruption collide when different groups or actors have different perceptions of what constitutes political corruption, and/or what is

correct or incorrect conduct for public officials. Before presenting our cases and discussing how they fit our proposed theoretical framework, we will first focus on the framework.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

### 2.1 Academic Corruption Discourses

Corruption is studied in a wide variety of scholarly disciplines, such as economics, political science or law. As a result several, sometimes overlapping, corruption discourses have evolved. Due to limited space only the most prominent ones will be critically assessed in this first section.<sup>1</sup>

Among the theoretical approaches we can discern a »Weberian ideal-typical approach«, often used by historians and social scientists studying political corruption. In this approach corruption is seen as deficient rationalization of the public service: corruption is a phase on the route from patrimonial to rational legal authority.<sup>2</sup> Second, a »structural functionalist approach« can be noted, which views society as a collection of coherent systems in which all societal phenomena have a function. Thus, structural-functionalist inspired scholars ask which function corruption fulfils in a specific society.<sup>3</sup> Corruption can serve to tone down overly harsh laws,<sup>4</sup> or provide protection and influence for groups in society that possess material wealth but lack political influence.<sup>5</sup> Another interesting approach to political corruption is the »system theory approach«. This is the view propagated by Niklas Luhmann, who sees society as divided into separate self-referential value systems. Political corruption ensues when these systems start to overlap, for instance when values from the economic system penetrate the legal or the political system.<sup>6</sup> Finally, an approach often used is the

»rationality and economy approach«. In this view corrupt officials are rational utility maximizers who simply take the most profitable course of action in every situation.<sup>7</sup> One notable example of the latter is the use of »principal agent theory«. <sup>8</sup> In general, the principal-agent problem concerns difficulties that arise because of asymmetric relationships between principal and agent. Many of these difficulties are inherent in the delegation of legislative authority to bureaucratic agencies. For example, bureaucrats often have expertise and/or knowledge of local circumstances that legislators and executives lack. Also, laws and directives are often open to bureaucratic interpretation and discretion. Political corruption is in this approach defined as civil servants (agents) violating their official duties (imposed by principals) by favouring certain persons (clients) for material rewards.

### 2.2 Disadvantages of these Approaches and their Inherent Definitions of Corruption: towards a Neo-Classical Approach

What either now or in the past is called or has been called political corruption is always largely determined by the use of aforementioned theoretical models and the discourses we adopt accordingly.<sup>9</sup> Although all approaches mentioned here focus on interesting elements that can (at least partly) explain political corruption, we should move beyond the limitations of any individual approach. Furthermore, concepts often used in these approaches are difficult to conceptualize in historical contexts.

The »rationality and economy approach«, for instance, is limited to economic motives and rational behaviour of individuals. Emotionally motivated political corruption employed for non-economic purposes largely falls outside its scope. Furthermore, this approach assumes a modern division between the public and the private. Another notable problem has to do with »principal agent theory«, which seems unable to explain political corruption outside formal, office-centred, and interpersonal relationships.<sup>10</sup> This approach is especially liable to affect or distort historical research into political corruption. What if, for instance, legal rules of office simply did not exist? What if it turns out to be impossible to state who was »principal« or »agent«? Surely, for much of European history solid legal regulations or clearly defined public offices are hard to find.

1 For a complete overview of the various theoretical approaches see: Gjalp de Graaf et al. (eds.), *The Good Cause: Theoretical Perspectives on Corruption*, Leuven 2010 [forthcoming].

2 Bernardus J. S. Hoeijes, *Corruptie in het openbare leven van ontwikkelingslanden. Een verkenning van theorie en onderzoek in het bijzonder gericht op India sinds 1947*, s.l. 1977, pp. 53 ff., see William David Rubinstein, *The End of »Old Corruption« in Britain 1780–1860*, in: *Past and Present* 101 (1983), pp. 55–86.

3 Hoeijes, *Corruptie* (1977), pp. 55 ff.; idem, *Corruptie bij de overheid. Een bestuurlijk en politiek probleem, sociaal-wetenschappelijk beschouwd*, s-Gravenhage 1982, pp. 67 ff.

4 Anthony McFarlane, *Political corruption and reform in Bourbon Spanish America*, in: Walter Little / Eduardo Posada-Carbo (Hg.), *Political corruption in Europe and Latin America*, New York 1996, pp. 41–63, 58 f.

5 Jean-Claude Waquet, *Corruption: Ethics and Power in Florence, 1600–1770*, University Park, Penn. 1991, p. 62.

6 Marleen Brans / Stefan Rosbach, *The autopoiesis of administrative systems*, Niklas Luhmann on public administration and public policy, in: *Public Administration* 75 (1997), pp. 419–439.

7 See Susan Rose-Ackerman, *Corruption. A study in political economy*, New York 1978, p. 4.

8 See ibid.; Robert E. Kilgus, *Controlling corruption*, Berkeley 1988.

9 See de Graaf et al. (eds.), *Good Cause*.

10 Michael Johnston, *The search for definitions: the vitality of politics and the issue of corruption*, in: *International Social Science Journal* 149 (1996), pp. 321–336, 326.

The few theoretical approaches discussed here are closely linked to standards encapsulated in definitions of political corruption. Many of the problems of the theoretical approaches mentioned above have to do with these standards. Frank Anechiarico and James Jacobs have described corruption as 'a social, legal, and political concept laden with ambiguity and bristling with controversy', arguing just how problematic defining corruption actually is.<sup>11</sup>

In its 'classical' meaning, political corruption was understood in a broad way. Authors such as Plato, Machiavelli or Montesquieu all spoke of 'the corruption of the body politic' in a general sense.<sup>12</sup> However, as the scope of politics broadened, our modern conception of political corruption has narrowed considerably.<sup>13</sup> As a result, many authors have tried to come up with more or less 'objective' standards to define individual political corruption. According to Carl Friedrich or Jacob van Klaveren, corruption is the misuse of public office for private purposes. Political corruption thus becomes deviant behaviour in which private benefits outweigh public interests.<sup>14</sup> This definition is related to the rational economic approach and is helpful when no formal legal standards are available or traceable. It does, however, presuppose a distinction between public and private and a fairly clear idea of what constitutes public interests, two issues which are highly contested, especially in historical context.<sup>15</sup>

Another standard often used in definitions of political corruption is public opinion.<sup>16</sup> Arnold Heidenheimer's congruence between moral condemnation by the elite and disapproval by the masses determines not only whether something is corrupt but also the severity of the corrupt act. This definition is useful because it takes into account both moral and social elements of corruption, and any clashes between different value frameworks. Problematic, of course, are the many difficulties involved in public opinion research.

11 Frank Anechiarico / James B. Jacobs, *The pursuit of absolute integrity: how corruption control makes government ineffective*, Chicago 1996, p. 16.

12 J. Patrick Doherty, *The corruption of a state*, in: *The American Political Science Review* 72 (1978), pp. 958-973.

13 Johnston, Search, p. 322; Graeme C. Moodie, *On Political Scandals and Corruption*, in: Arnold J. Heidenheimer et al. (eds.), *Political Corruption: a Handbook*, New Brunswick, NJ 1989, pp. 873-886.

14 Carl J. Friedrich, *Political pathology*, in: *The Political Quarterly* 37 (1966), pp. 70-85, 74; Jacob van Klaveren, *The Concept of Corruption*, in: Heidenheimer et al. (eds.), *Political Corruption*, pp. 25-28.

15 Vgl. F. Pieter Wagenaar, *Wine turned sour? Private gain, public verdict*; Seis, Scheepmaker, and the public-private dichotomy, in: Mark R. Rutgers (ed.), *Retracting public administration*, Amsterdam 2003, pp. 107-143.

16 Arnold J. Heidenheimer, *Perspectives on the Perception of Corruption*, in: idem et al. (eds.), *Political Corruption*, pp. 149-163, 161.

Finally, some have proposed a 'public-office centred' definition.<sup>17</sup> According to James Scott the standard by which to define corruption is found in legal codes and rules that apply to public office as corruption is 'the violation of formal duties of a public role because of private-regarding wealth or status gains'.<sup>18</sup> Legal rules can of course serve as a more or less objective standard, which makes this kind of definition relatively easy to operationalize. However, in our short assessment of principal agent theory above we have already noted the most important downside to this kind of definition and approach: it does not take into account the normative issues surrounding corruption. It also seems to presuppose formal rules, regulations, and clearly defined public roles.

In essence, the aforementioned approaches and their inherent definitions are part of the conflict between a desire for (easily) applicable definitions on the one hand, and the need to do justice to the complexity of corruption in a historical context on the other. The following section contains an outline of an approach which we think is capable of bridging this gap.

## 2.4 A Neo-Classical Approach:

### An Alternative for Studying Corruption in Historical Contexts

Various scholars have presented a so-called 'post-modern' or 'cultural/constructivist' approach to confront the issue of defining and explaining corruption in historical contexts.<sup>19</sup> These scholars focus on how political corruption is actually constructed or how it acquires its meaning. Political corruption, then, has a social meaning, which must be understood in relation to its social setting. This means that its content differs between societies and groups within societies and throughout history.

The 'neo-classical approach' presented by the political scientist Michael Johnston can also be situated within this post-modern strand. Because his approach is of particular use for the purposes of this article we will discuss it here in more detail. Johnston has discussed many downsides of the different standards by which corruption is often defined and, subsequently, stated that

where agreement over the meanings of 'public', 'private', 'abuse' and 'benefit' is weak [...] we should think of corruption as a politically contested or unresolved concept and study the conflicts that shape it as an issue.<sup>20</sup>

17 Joseph S. Nye, *Corruption and political development. A cost-benefit analysis*, in: *American Political Science Review* 61 (1967), pp. 417-427; James C. Scott, *Comparative political corruption*, Englewood Cliffs 1972.

18 Ibid., p. 4.

19 See Johnston, Search; Tone Kristin Sissenet, *Anthropological perspectives on corruption*, Bergen 2001; Dirk Tänzler, *Korruption als Metapher. Tatsachen, Wahrnehmungen, Deutungsmuster*, in: *Mittelweg* 36 17/1 (2008), pp. 69-84.

20 Johnston, Search, p. 333.

From this we can conclude how corruption should not be defined exclusively by legal, market or public opinion criteria. Rather, Johnston seems to imply that a concept of corruption has to be flexible enough to include all these sets of norms and the effect of their interaction in the construction of the meaning of corruption. A definition, according to Johnston, should not (just) look at specific individual actions but at the broader processes of consent, influence and authority instead. Corruption, in this view, becomes »the abuse, according to the legal or social standards constituting a society's system of public order, of a public role or resource for private benefit.«<sup>21</sup> This approach by Johnston seems to incorporate all major aforementioned standards underlying definitions of corruption and is concerned with corruption as a political and moral issue.

Johnston's approach has several advantages, especially when investigating corruption in historical context. Most notably, corruption and improper official conduct are viewed as political and societal issues rather than solely as individual acts between agents and principals. It is a view on corruption that is broad enough to include both wrongful individual behaviour and the political and social processes that define it as such. Also, it allows for a highly flexible approach to investigate ever-changing interpretations of political corruption. It might help us to understand when and why certain behaviour becomes (un)acceptable. After all, Johnston invites us to »consider not only how laws affect behaviour, but also how they might come to fit established customs.«<sup>22</sup> Finally, and most importantly, Johnston's approach is useful since he invites us to investigate how the content of notions such as »abuse«, »public role« and »private benefit« are contested in specific places and periods. He believes it is precisely in the clash over boundaries that a concept like political corruption acquires its true meaning.

We should emphasize here that Johnston (somewhat paradoxically) actually does not provide a definition. Rather, he puts forward an approach by which to find »contemporary« definitions and understandings of corruption. This, for reasons mentioned above, makes his approach highly feasible and useful for historical research on corruption. It is precisely the contextual nature of corruption which rules out any universal understanding or specific definition of corruption. In a way, only value judgments, which change in time, place and setting, determine what constitutes corruption in any practical historical sense.

## 2.5 The Neo-Classical Approach in Terms of Practical Historical Research

We now return to the issue of conceptualization, with Johnston's approach in mind. Johnston's »clash over boundaries« often becomes apparent in scandals and corruption cases. Scandals can reveal implicit assumptions and expectations regarding public official behaviour; they can become instruments by which to trace political corruption and appropriate or inappropriate behaviour, and to identify different interpretations over time.<sup>23</sup> For instance, scandal, debate, and contest can help us to explain why and when it became unacceptable for a magistrate to buy, sell, or »give away« his public office to friends or family.

Johnston's boundaries manifest themselves between different »sources of societal values«. In this article, as elsewhere,<sup>24</sup> we will largely follow Hoeijes and distinguish between four different sources of societal values: »best opinion« or public rectitude, legal codes, public opinion, and so called »codes of the shop floor«.<sup>25</sup> Each of these sources shows us a particular view on political corruption and usually has a part to play in corruption scandals. Boundaries between these sources are crossed when different sources proclaim conflicting values, or when the same values are interpreted in different ways. It is, for instance, easy to see how perfectly legal behaviour can still be considered immoral and reprehensible by the public.

## 2.6 Case Studies on Political Corruption in Historical Perspective

A crucial element of the conceptualization of political corruption as we present it in this article is our combination of any or all sources of values mentioned before, around single cases of explicit political corruption and debate. As indicated earlier, single standards or value sources are not comprehensive enough to grasp the complex phenomenon of political corruption. Only in the interaction between different sources is the actual meaning of political corruption constructed. The following two cases exemplify this approach, and show how political corruption attains specific and contextual meanings in different historical contexts.

23 Moodie, Scandals, p. 873; Lawrence W. Sherman, *The Mobilization of Scandal*, in: Heidenheimer et al. (eds.), *Political Corruption*, pp. 887–912.

24 Vgl. Michel P. Hoenderboom / Antoon D. N. Kerthoff, *Corruption and Capability in the Dutch Republic: the Case of Lodewijk Huygens* (1676), in: *Public Voices XI/2* (2008), pp. 7–24.

25 Vgl. Hoeijes, *Corruptie* (1977); idem, *Corruptie* (1982).

21 Ibid., p. 331.

22 Ibid.

### 3. The Case of Cornelis Schrevelius and Johan van den Bergh: Value Pluralism in the Early Modern Dutch Republic

#### 3.1 Introduction

For most of the eighteenth century the hunt for lucrative positions dominated the political process in the Dutch Republic. As in other cities in the province of Holland at that time, the local government of the city of Leiden was organized around the city council. The council ran an elaborate administration for all the relevant affairs in the city as well as representing Leiden in the provincial and union governments. Since it was up to the council to choose new candidates for such positions as »burgomaster« or »alderman« from their midst, membership of the council was the stepping stone for all sorts of politically and/or financially attractive activities and positions.<sup>26</sup> In every city in the province of Holland the same instruments were applied to ensure a smooth allocation of offices within the city council. Agreements between magistrates were represented by so-called »contracts of correspondence«; rotation schedules and everlasting calendars regulating the distribution of these offices (as well as the trade in these positions) were supposed to guarantee stability in city governments.<sup>27</sup>

The election of magistrates for new or vacant positions mostly happened according to strict rules of rank and seniority. Results were often already fixed before a vote was recorded, so under normal circumstances every magistrate was eventually promoted by way of a predetermined series of offices. For example, after being appointed to the city council, the order of seniority would determine admission to the office of alderman. Being an alderman was, in turn, a prerequisite to become a burgomaster, the highest attainable office in local government. Such systems of seniority were common for most of the eighteenth century and political reality often followed these rules. Yet, sometimes strife and scandal would ensue when a magistrate or a minority in the city council would be excluded from the order of accession.<sup>28</sup> Sometimes, for instance, the smallest possible majority tried to exclude the remaining councilmen, which would have disastrous consequences for the careers of the outcasts. The scandals resulting from such practices were often associated with accusations of corruption, which is why they are ideal for »Johnstonian« research into political corruption, as these cases reveal the values underlying political corruption in early modern public administration.

26 Maarten R. Prak, *Gezeten burgers. De elite in een Hollandse stad. Leiden 1700–1780*, Amsterdam 1985, p. 30.

27 Jan A. F. de Jongste, *Het politieke leven in de 18de eeuw. Een bewind op zijn smalst. Het politiek bedrijf in de jaren 1727–1747*, in: *Algemene Geschiedenis der Nederlanden* 9 (1980), pp. 44–59, esp. 48.

28 Prak, *Gezeten burgers*, p. 41.

In 1747 such a conflict arose between two magistrates in Leiden: Cornelis Schrevelius and Johan van den Bergh accused each other of wrongful behaviour. What had caused this conflict? On 23 February 1722 the majority of the Leiden city council had united itself under a new contract of correspondence, thereby excluding Cornelis Schrevelius and his group.<sup>29</sup> The careers of the outcasts were to turn out failures, since suddenly they were excluded from administrative and political influence. Not until 1747 were these excluded magistrates able to make a modest return to the Leiden political arena, thanks to the new Stadtholder William IV.<sup>30</sup> As it turned out, the exclusion of Schrevelius some twenty years before was closely linked to the ambitions of one of his fellow magistrates, Johan van den Bergh.

#### 3.2 The Ambitions of Johan van den Bergh in 1725

Apart from jobs in the city of Leiden council members also had duties outside the city walls, such as offices associated with the dike board of Rijnland, the area of which the city of Leiden and the surrounding villages formed part.<sup>31</sup> In 1725 the position of dike reeve of Rijnland became vacant. The powerful magistrate Johan van den Bergh wished to expand his influence and attempted to acquire the office. The position of dike reeve was a very lucrative one, which could yield up to a hefty 15,000 guilders a year.<sup>32</sup> Traditionally the dike reeve was a member of the Holland nobility, which was allowed to propose one of its own for the office. The Leiden council therefore had to come up with a strong candidate. They decided upon Johan van den Bergh. In June 1725 a delegation of Leiden magistrates toured the cities of Holland trying to win support for Van den Bergh's candidacy, as it was the States of Holland (in which the cities were represented) that would eventually make the decision.<sup>33</sup> The tour was successful. On 21 July 1725 Van den Bergh got the job.<sup>34</sup> However, in 1747 (22 years later!) it turned out that Van den Bergh's success of 1725 was still capable of causing discontent with his fellow magistrate Cornelis Schrevelius.

29 Frans van Mieris, *Handvesten, Privilegien, Octroyen, Rechten en Vrijheden, misgaders Ordomanten, Resolutien, Pakkaaten, Verbinctissen, Costumen, Instructien- en Handelungen der Stad Leyden*, Leiden 1759, pp. 172–175 (»Official papers regarding Leiden«, hereafter »Leiden papers«, 2-23-1722, RAL, LB 264).

30 Prak, *Gezeten burgers*, pp. 86 ff.

31 *Ibid.*, p. 37.

32 *Leiden Papers*, 6-29-1726, RAL, LB 15032; vgl. Prak, *Gezeten burgers*, p. 90.

33 Prak, *Gezeten burgers*, p. 90.

34 Rudi C. J. van Maanen, *Een Leidse lobby in 1725*, in: *Leids Jaarboekje* 92 (2000), p. 105.



### 3.3 Promises Honoured or Broken?

In 1747 Schrevelius, by then a long-time member of the minority in the Leiden council, looked back on years of total exclusion from the political arena. On 22 August of that year the frustrated magistrate published a pamphlet about the troubles that had befallen him since 1722, when he and several other magistrates had been excluded from government.<sup>35</sup> His main target in the pamphlet was Johan van den Bergh.

Schrevelius presented his own account of the Leiden delegation's tour of the cities of Holland twenty years earlier. He described how the delegation arrived in Haarlem, where Van den Bergh had spoken with burgomaster Hendrik Witte, a close friend of Schrevelius. Witte had apparently asked that in return for his efforts on behalf of Van den Bergh's candidature the latter would also honour some wishes of the Haarlem burgomaster. Witte had demanded an end to the strife in the Leiden administration, as well as the exclusion of several magistrates from participation in government. More specifically, he requested that two of his close friends, among them Schrevelius, should be reinstated in the contract of correspondence. Schrevelius solemnly declared that he had been told these facts several times by Hendrik Witte himself.<sup>36</sup>

In September 1727 three persons were nominated for the position of sheriff of Leiden. Schrevelius' cousin, Rynier Roosenboom, considered that it was time for Johan van den Bergh to honour the promises made to Hendrik Witte. As Van den Bergh was also indebted to Roosenboom, the latter demanded that Van den Bergh should choose the magistrate Roosenboom would suggest as the potential new sheriff. Van den Bergh solemnly promised to honour this request – which of course meant that Roosenboom would be putting forward Schrevelius.<sup>37</sup> Yet Van den Bergh's promise to reinstate Schrevelius as a member of the correspondence and to nominate him as the new sheriff had been false. On 10 November 1727 fellow magistrate Van der Mark was appointed instead.<sup>38</sup>

Schrevelius' opponents were quick to react in 1747 by publishing their own pamphlet.<sup>39</sup> In it they claimed Schrevelius' assertions were false and solely intended to arouse hatred towards Van den Bergh. No promise by the latter to Roosenboom had ever existed.<sup>40</sup> The opponents' pamphlet stated that Johan van den Bergh's freedom to make any promises at all had been limited. In the year 1727 Van den Bergh had had to consider six other (former) burgomasters

35 Kunttel, 1978: microfiche [mf] 17783, 8-22-1747; see also Leiden papers, 1747, RAL, LB 687 and RAL, LB 707.

36 Kunttel, 1978: mf. 17783, 8-22-1747, folio [f.] 3.

37 Ibid., f. 5.

38 Ibid., f. 8.

39 Kunttel, 1978: mf. 17786, 1747; see also Leiden Papers, 1747, RAL, LB 712.

40 Kunttel, 1978: mf. 17786, 1747, f. 4.

and members of the correspondence, who were all senior members of the Leiden council. Schrevelius should have known that observing rank and order of seniority was the foundation of politics<sup>41</sup> and that Van den Bergh could not possibly comply with Hendrik Witte's request for the reinstatement of Schrevelius. This would have meant a serious disruption of the existing correspondence in Leiden. The opponents' pamphlet asserted that Witte himself also knew the importance of a correspondence, since a similar contract existed in Haarlem.<sup>42</sup> For that reason Schrevelius' expectations to obtain the lucrative office of sheriff had thus been highly unrealistic.

### 3.4 For the Benefit of the »Common Good«

The conflict of 1747 between the Leiden factions can be viewed from a »Johnstonian« perspective. Johnston's approach to political corruption as a construct not only gives us the opportunity to look at wrongful individual behaviour of the two magistrates, but also offers us a view on the broader processes of consent, influence and authority. In the same year as the strife between Schrevelius and Van den Bergh took place, a French invasion and the ensuing unrest led to widespread support for the speedy appointment of the Prince of Orange as the new Stadtholder of Holland.<sup>43</sup> On 3 May 1747 the Prince's appointment was a fact.<sup>44</sup> Among the issues that caused discontent, the exclusion of many from participation in government was prominent. In short, for the first time serious questions were raised regarding the delegation of sovereignty to an oligarchy and the obedience to patrician authority.<sup>45</sup> Reformers fuelled the discontent, criticizing the oligarchy and advocating an end to the abuses associated with the bestowal of office. Wealthy citizens excluded from participation in government by the oligarchy's correspondences demanded political influence. Radical representatives of the movement even advocated the removal of the entire old clique of magistrates.<sup>46</sup> The periodical press created an image of continual abuse within the oligarchy and accused the magistrates of nepotism and venality, all detri-

41 Ibid., f. 7.

42 Ibid., f. 16f.

43 Stadtholders (Stadhouder) had traditionally acted as representatives of the Habsburg rulers in the Low Countries from the fifteenth century onwards. After the revolt against the Spanish king in 1581 the Dutch Republic however kept the office intact. The Stadtholder had much influence due to his authority to appoint people in important positions, his prestige, and his dynastic pretensions. See Jonathan I. Israel, *The Dutch Republic. Its rise, greatness and fall 1477–1806*, Oxford 1998, pp. 300–306.

44 *Leiden Papers*, 4-30-1747, 5-3-1747, RAL, LB 787.

45 Vgl. Simon Schama, *The embarrassment of riches. An interpretation of Dutch culture in the Golden Age*, London 1987, pp. 600f.

46 Jan A. E. de Jongste, *Het politieke leven in de 18de eeuw. De Republiek onder het erfstadhouderschap 1747–1780*, in: *Algemene Geschiedenis der Nederlanden* 9 (1980), pp. 73–91, 82f.



mental to the »welfare and order« of the country. The discharge of an office should be directed towards the interests of the people, not to self-interests such as increase of personal wealth or power and advancement of family relations.<sup>47</sup>

The Leiden magistrates were subject to the same criticism. Accusations of transgressions reveal new implicit assumptions and expectations regarding public office. For example, reformers demanded that before the appointment or reinstatement of a magistrate an investigation should be conducted whether or not the candidate was sensible, honest, capable, friendly and devout. Senior local administrators should undergo an exam prior to their appointment as well as show some written documents as proof of their ability. Offices should be awarded only to inhabitants of the city, and these would need to fulfil the positions in person.<sup>48</sup>

Other socio-economic and political developments are useful to place the conflict between Schrevelius and Van den Bergh in a wider perspective. Citizens in the Dutch Republic were subject to a high burden of taxation (often levied maliciously) and rising costs of living. In 1747 and 1748 these issues fuelled popular dissatisfaction and protest vis-à-vis the government and/or ruling elites.<sup>49</sup> Overall discontent regarding socio-economic and political issues led to calls for administrative reform. One such call was a plea for the public auctioning of offices for the benefit of the »common good«.<sup>50</sup> People demanded that proceeds from these sales would fall to the common means instead of already affluent magistrates. For the ruling oligarchy these proposals obviously meant a direct attack on their position and their powers of patronage and clientelism.<sup>51</sup> During their conflict in 1747 Schrevelius and Van den Bergh still took the practice of correspondence and rotation of office for granted. However, what seemed self-evident to them was now increasingly being questioned.

Proposals for the public auctioning of offices were also heard in Leiden. One pamphleteer hoped that the proceeds would generate considerable sums for the benefit of the common good (i.e. the city of Leiden). He also widened the scope of the »common good« to include the entire province of Holland by calling upon every city in the province to adopt the new proposals. The burgomasters of Amsterdam were used as an example to show why the practices surrounding the bestowal of office should change. These wealthy men enjoyed generous incomes of up to 70,000 guilders a year from the postal services and other public

47 Simon Schama, *Patriots and Liberators. Revolution in the Netherlands 1780–1813*, New York 1977, pp. 47 f.

48 Leiden Papers, 1748, RAL, LB 773, f. 30 f.

49 Israel, *Dutch Republic*, pp. 1069, 1073–1078.

50 The »common good« in this sense denoted the wellbeing of either the city or the province, never that of the Republic as a whole. The »common good« of city or province was often the direct opposite of the »private good« of the individual magistrate. Still, individual magistrates would argue equally convincingly how the »common good« pertained to the interests of their respective factions.

51 De Jongste, *Politieke leven*, pp. 77 f.

offices, besides the interest they received from their considerable fortunes. If the postal services and similar offices were to be employed for the benefit of the common good, the Province's debts could finally be paid!<sup>52</sup>

In the end most of the reformers' proposals failed due to considerable disagreement within the reform movement. Also, the reformers' trust in the new Stadtholder proved misplaced.<sup>53</sup> The Prince had too much regard for, and was too much a part of, the established order which meant that any plan for »revolutionary« change was torpedoed.<sup>54</sup> As to the failure of specific reforms in Leiden, we have to wonder whether the Leiden citizens were truly ready for a radical break with the administration.

### 3.5 Early Modern Political Corruption in a »Johnstonian« Perspective

The conflict between Schrevelius and Van den Bergh as well as the more general calls for reform has much to say about the contextual meaning of political corruption in the early modern Dutch Republic. A corruption scandal like this is useful in that it reveals many implicit values underlying political corruption. It shows the importance of context. In 1747 we see multiple coexisting, and sometimes conflicting, standards of correct ethical conduct. Especially interesting are the conflicting values regarding the bestowal of office that we find when we compare the conflict between Schrevelius and Van den Bergh (with a focus on wrongful individual behaviour) on the one hand, and the reform movement of the same year (with a broader notion of political corruption and a focus on the political system) on the other. Different groups apparently had very different perceptions of political corruption.

Schrevelius mainly agitated against the fact that the promises to reinstate him as a member of the correspondence and to appoint him as the new sheriff had not been kept. Both magistrates' modes of thought were still firmly rooted in the existing value system concerning the bestowal of office. According to this system, administration should be carried out by those most suitable for the position, i.e., those whose ancestors or relations had already been (long-time) members of the administration. For Schrevelius and Van den Bergh contracts of correspondence and rotation of offices were still the cornerstones of everyday administration. Yet, when an oath or promise was made it should be respected. Not honouring a promise was considered unethical by Schrevelius. Johan van den Bergh used similar arguments to argue the opposite. According to him he simply could not have made a promise to Schrevelius, because in 1727 there had

52 Knuttel, 1978: mff 18169, 1748, f. 29 ff.

53 Schama, *Patriots*, p. 53.

54 De Jongste, *Politieke leven*, p. 84.

also been six other, more senior, members of the correspondence that had to be taken into consideration.

As common principles<sup>55</sup> concerning the appointment of magistrates ultimately remained intact after 1748, practical rules regarding rank and seniority in office rotation also continued to show much regularity until the 1780s.<sup>56</sup> In 1747 Van den Bergh's and Schrevelius' ideas and values on the proper way to govern did not seem outdated. Yet around 1747 it also became clear that the sovereignty of magistrates and obedience to patrician authority were increasingly challenged. There were calls for reform among the periodical press, the population in general and a growing number of wealthy citizens.

It is therefore important to note that the failure of reforms does not mean we cannot speak of changing or shifting values. In keeping with our »Johnstonian approach« we should realize that changes in attitudes and assumptions concerning correct public official conduct or administration do not happen overnight but usually take a long time to sink in. We thus refine Maarten Prak's statement that in 1748 the foundations of the system were not really affected.<sup>57</sup> It is our position that although the »praxis« of office allocation did not change for quite some time, »ideas« that this praxis was no longer tenable did arise from circa 1747 onwards. Similar calls for reform would, furthermore, grow in importance and continuously re-enter the political debate. This was, for instance, the case in the (failed) Patriot Revolution of 1787 and the (successful) Batavian Revolution of 1795. In 1747 the more radical reformers truly believed that »the system« through which offices were allocated was not acceptable any more. They just did not have the real power (yet) to break that system.

### 3.6 From Eighteenth-Century Value Pluralism to a Nineteenth-Century Dominant Liberal Value System

The case of Schrevelius and Van den Bergh shows how a historical corruption scandal can provide material that substantiates, complements or corrects abstract and general notions of political corruption. Applying a broad but flexible »neo-classical« approach and conceptual framework to historical case studies thus helps us to better understand the meaning, content and change of political corruption in historical contexts. In the following we will continue along this path with a case study on corruption in the Netherlands in the second half of the nineteenth century. Although different in context and content, both cases are ultimately linked by the possibilities they offer to use the Johnstonian ap-

proach. As will be discussed in more detail later on, the two cases also provide preliminary evidence of a shift from value pluralism to a dominant Liberal value system regarding public administration; a value system that, in its turn, eventually would also become contested.

## 4. Clashing Views on Correct Public Official Behaviour: the Letters Affair of 1865

### 4.1 Introduction

In 1862 the Dutch Liberals were at the height of their power when their leader J. R. Thorbecke (1798–1872) became Prime Minister for the second time. In November 1865, however, rumours arose that important Liberal politicians, among them Thorbecke, were involved in unduly influencing the parliamentary elections by means of inappropriate deals concerning tax collection in the Dutch province of Limburg. A scandal erupted when a damaging letter on the subject was published in several newspapers. Conflict about bureaucratic and political reforms between the two largest political factions in parliament, the Conservatives and the Liberals, were an additional reason for polarization. Since 1848 Liberals had steadily come to dominate Dutch politics, claiming, according to their opponents, moral superiority and behaving arrogantly. Many anti-Liberal politicians felt offended because they considered themselves to be just as capable. During the 1860s the dominant Liberal value system attracted much criticism from a variety of sources for a variety of reasons. Many anti-Liberal opponents joined each other under the name of »Conservatives«. Furthermore, populist Catholics also prominently joined the fray. In the complex 1860s political power play both »groups« tried to unravel the Liberals' superiority claims, and oust them from their prominent political and administrative positions, although all had their own particular reasons for doing so.

Both Conservatives and Catholics turned against the hidden – behind the scenes – practices supposedly inherent in the Liberal value system. It was argued by all that these mechanisms were still widely in place and that the Liberals therefore did not adhere to their own rules. However, where the Conservatives largely agreed with the general Liberal value system as such, many Catholics did argue for radical change. Politician and journalist L. Haffmans, for instance, vehemently called for enforcing regional (i. e. Limburg) instead of national interests.<sup>58</sup> This went too far according to many Conservatives. Seeing themselves as belonging to the same class as the Liberals, on this matter the Conservatives

55 See Witte van Citters, *Contracten van correspondentie en andere bijdragen tot de geschiedenis van het ambtsbijzorg in de Republiek der Verenigde Nederlanden*, s-Gravenhage 1873.

56 Prak, *Gezeten burgers*, p. 100.

57 Ibid., p. 94.

58 Vgl. Smaregdus H. H. van der Hoeek, *Limburgs Groote Mond. De Politicus en Journalist Mr. Leopold Haffmans (1826–1896)*, Amsterdam 2005.

joined the Liberals in opposition to what was called »Catholic populism«. The broader Liberal values discourse, then, was only really attacked by the Catholics. Incidentally, this was also the main reason why, at the end of the day, the reputation of Thorbecke or the Liberals was not seriously affected.

#### 4.2 A Disturbing Letter

The immediate source of the scandal was the publication of a letter written by the Liberal Finance Minister G. H. Betz in the anti-Liberal Limburg newspaper »Venloosch Weekblad« on 18 November 1865, followed by its publication in the well-known Liberal newspaper »Algemeen Handelsblad« on 22 November. During the election campaign of 1864 Betz had written this letter to P. Th. van der Maesen de Sombreff, a Liberal-minded Member of Parliament representing the district of Maastricht in Limburg. Van der Maesen had shown Betz' letter to voters in the district of Maastricht in an attempt to win their support. In the letter, Betz promised that the tax increases for Limburg would be cancelled in exchange for Liberal support from Limburg voters. Betz had written:

With you I hope that [...] Liberal principles in Limburg will be victorious [...]. And [...] thanks to the loyal support of the Limburg delegates in the two chambers,<sup>59</sup> [I have] made you a promise that I shall cancel the land tax, if the attitude of Limburg makes it possible for me to do so. [I have also ordered the director of taxes] to not prosecute small tax offenders. [...] People in Limburg will see that the Minister of Finance is not so bad after all.<sup>60</sup>

According to one contemporary Liberal politician and historian it was very clear »that the unpopular tax proposals would be repealed in case the election should show a favourable result for the Liberals.«<sup>61</sup> The Liberal newspaper »Algemeen Handelsblad« had to admit that Betz »could at least be blamed for an act of imprudence, something which we had not expected of him.«<sup>62</sup> Shortly after the publication of the letter Betz resigned as a result of the criticism.

A political scandal was born when others, especially Conservatives, spoke openly of »corruption«.<sup>63</sup> The Conservative J. P. J. A. van Zuylen van Nijvelt linked corruption to private benefit. The Netherlands had a system of census suffrage which meant that the right to vote was based on taxation, possessions

and property. Some hundred thousand men were wealthy enough to have this right. Of course these men were concerned about changes in the system of taxation. Van Zuylen pointed out that the deal proposed by Betz was a case of corruption because some of the persons implicated »could calculate down to the last penny how large the financial advantage of the withdrawal of the tax proposal would be for them.«<sup>64</sup>

#### 4.3 A Liberal Value System Concerning Ethics of Public Administration

The debate about the Letters Affair should be understood within wider developments of Liberal ideas on political integrity, morality and ethics. After the European revolutions of 1848, most of Europe's Liberals, including the Dutch, led the process of political modernization.<sup>65</sup> The Dutch Liberals were concerned with establishing new forms of »good citizenship« and »good governance and politics«.<sup>66</sup> They justified their political power by claiming that they, more than anyone else, had the »capacity« or »character« to govern and were better able to follow modern values and rules than Conservative aristocrats on the one hand, or radical Democrats on the other.

In the tradition of the ancien régime, Conservative politicians claimed that only a very small group of persons (i. e. the aristocracy) was sufficiently capable for politics. Radical Democrats defended the opposite view by stating that everybody was capable of voting and governing. Liberals took up a position between these two extremes in advocating lineage as well as capability.<sup>67</sup> The Liberal idea of »capability« was based on the fairly static view that some persons had it and others did not. Dutch Liberals clearly had »burgers« in mind.<sup>68</sup> »Burgers« were, in general, reasonably well-off, (high)middle class citizens. They had been educated at universities, usually in law, and often had an independent profession as professor, lawyer or entrepreneur. The Dutch Liberals, as other Liberals in Europe,<sup>69</sup> thus propagated a view on »good public behaviour« based on »bourgeois« values and characteristics which was to have an enormous influence on politics and public administration.

<sup>64</sup> HTK, 12 December 1865, p. 341.

<sup>65</sup> Michael Rapport, *Nineteenth-century Europe*, New York 2005, pp. 133 ff.

<sup>66</sup> Henk te Velde, *Constitutionele politiek. De parlementair-politieke praktijk en de Grondwet van 1848*, in: idem / Niek C. F. van Sas (eds.), *De eeuw van de grondwet. Grondwet en politiek in Nederland, 1798–1917*, Deventer 1998, pp. 147–181, esp. 147–150; Alan S. Kahan, *Liberalism in nineteenth-century Europe. The political Culture of Limited Suffrage*, New York 2003, p. 8.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., p. 6.

<sup>68</sup> As in »bourgeois« or the German »Bürger« and French »citoyen«.

<sup>69</sup> Jan Drenth, Thorbecke. Een filosoof in de politiek, Amsterdam 2004, pp. 18 f., 63 f.; Kahan, *Liberalism*, pp. 8 ff.

<sup>59</sup> The First and Second Chambers in Dutch Parliament.

<sup>60</sup> *Algemeen Handelsblad*, 22 November 1865.

<sup>61</sup> Wilco Julius van Welderen Rengers, *Schets eener parlementaire geschiedenis van Nederland*, Den Haag 1888 (reprint 1948), p. 316.

<sup>62</sup> *Algemeen Handelsblad*, 21 November 1865.

<sup>63</sup> *Handelingen van de Tweede Kamer (HTK)*, 11 December 1865, P. Regout to the chairman of Parliament (11 December 1865), in: HTK, 11 December 1865, p. 317.

According to this liberal-bourgeois value system public officials should be »appropriate«, »formal«, »strict«, »honourable« and »decent«.<sup>70</sup> Most importantly they should serve the »general« instead of the »particular« interest, respect the »independence« of public officials and display openness in every matter of »public« importance. In this way rational decisions could be taken independently from voters to genuinely serve the »general interest«.<sup>71</sup> Before 1848 it was common to appoint officials by using criteria based on – in the words of the Liberal leader Thorbecke – »family background more than ability«.<sup>72</sup> Afterwards, appointments and decisions were required to take place in public rather than behind closed doors, and were to be based on rational criteria such as education, knowledge and skills. Cronyism, (local) clientelism and/or nepotism were increasingly openly rejected as forces in the distribution of public offices.<sup>73</sup> Public officials should not make decisions which would favour political, private or local interests; only the general interest (i.e. the nation as a whole) should be served.<sup>74</sup> Many Liberals articulated this value system loudly in the press, and the public came to expect a corresponding pattern of behaviour from Liberal public officials.

This »apparently« coherent Liberal public value system was especially propagated by Thorbecke. When he was installed as Prime Minister in 1849 he began reorganizing the central, provincial and local bureaucracy and government. The Dutch governmental system of the 1840s was far from professionalized and many aristocratic Conservatives were active as public officials. As Thorbecke had said, he would select on ability rather than family background when appointing public officials. He proclaimed that he would change the system and use rational rather than »arbitrary« criteria. As Minister of the Interior he had great influence on procedures of selection and appointment, appointing not only civil servants of the most important department – the Department of Interior Affairs – but also the mayors and commissioners of provinces.<sup>75</sup>

Despite of what Thorbecke was saying in press and parliament, his way of appointing people could be (and was increasingly) regarded as based on political

70 Joost Kloek / Karin Tilmans (eds.), *Burger. Een geschiedenis van het begrip »burger«* in de Nederlanden van de Middeleeuwen tot de 21ste eeuw, Amsterdam 2002, pp. 244 ff., 315–320.

71 Nico Randeraad / Dirk J. Wolfrum, *Constraints on Clientelism: the Dutch Path to Modern Politics, 1848–1917*, in: Simona Platoni (ed.), *Clientelism, Interests and Democratic Representation: the European Experience in Historical and Comparative Perspective*, Cambridge 2001, pp. 101–121, 105.

72 Remieg Aerts et al., *Land van kleine gebaren. Politieke Geschiedenis van Nederland 1780–1990*, Nijmegen 1999, p. 102.

73 Nico Randeraad / Dirk J. Wolfrum, *De Nederlandse bestuurscultuur in historisch perspectief*, in: Frank Hendriks / Theo A. J. Toonen. (eds.), *Schikken en Plooiën. De stroperige staat bij nader inzien*, Assen 1998, pp. 35–49, 40.

74 Randeraad / Wolfrum, *Constraints*, p. 105.

75 Nico Randeraad, Thorbecke en de inrichting van het lokaal bestuur, in: *Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis* 107 (1994), pp. 537–558.

motives. Thorbecke for instance dismissed four out of eleven province »commissioners« for being proponents of the »old system«. Instead he appointed new, Liberal-minded commissioners. Also, important civil servants in his department were replaced by his former students whom he knew from his time as a professor in Leiden.<sup>76</sup> He also refused to appoint both a brother and a nephew of F. A. van Hall to important positions, arguably because Van Hall was Thorbecke's biggest political opponent during the 1850s.<sup>77</sup> Another controversial decision was the appointment of mayor G. H. Pijls in the Limburg city of Maastricht, who was an outspoken supporter of Thorbecke and openly frustrated non-Liberals in his city. Such behaviour was not uncommon, however. When, for example, Van Hall became Prime Minister in 1853 he dismissed several high-ranking civil servants who had been appointed by Thorbecke, and chose his own political friends to replace them.<sup>78</sup> Thus, appointments in the Dutch public administration still looked in part like a spoils system in these years of political and bureaucratic modernization. This again reminds us that old practices concerning the bestowal of office (cf. Schrevelius and Van den Bergh!) had not yet been fully eradicated. Despite several supposedly ill-functioning political friends of Thorbecke even his critics had to admit that most of the persons he appointed were indeed capable and qualified.

The fact that opponents of the Liberals also appointed men for political reasons »indicates« that both Liberals and their opponents sometimes valued personal and party interests over ability. Clear and uniform rules concerning appointments sometimes had to take a backseat. This was also due to a lack of professionalization and rationalization of the civil service which would only really be put in motion during more structured »Weberian« reforms in the 1870s.<sup>79</sup>

#### 4.4 Independent Officials and Appointments Based on Ability?

Even after Betz' resignation the Letters Affair was far from over. In parliament the debate continued, which resulted in the resignation of its implicated member, Van der Maesen de Sombreff. Meanwhile, newspapers in Limburg, such as the »Venloosch Weekblad« and the Francophone »L'ami des intérêts Limbourgeois«, as well as local anti-Liberal politicians called for an investigation thereby arousing debate.

76 Pieter G. van IJsselmuiden, *Binnenlandse Zaken en het ontstaan van de moderne bureaucratie in Nederland 1813–1940*, Kampen 1988, pp. 110, 118, 120.

77 Henk te Velde, *Stijlen van leiderschap. Persoon en politiek van Thorbecke tot Den Uyl*, Amsterdam 2002, p. 31.

78 IJsselmuiden, *Binnenlandse Zaken*, p. 121.

79 Ibid., pp. 128, 133.

First, there was the issue whether politicians, public officials, and civil servants were allowed to influence elections and thus affect the independence of other public officials. On 18 November 1865 the Conservative MP J. P. P. van Zuylen van Nijeveld raised this issue and asked Thorbecke during a parliamentary debate whether it was true that not only »direct influence but also indirect, more veiled influence, i. e. granting financial support or benefiting local interests, could be very beneficial for a clever Liberal government?«<sup>80</sup> Thorbecke replied sarcastically: »Am I to consider these subjects important enough to answer?«, and then responded more angrily: »I do not accept these kinds of charges [...]. The Minister of the Interior [i. e. Thorbecke himself] has always taken care to ensure that civil servants [...] do not influence elections.«<sup>81</sup> According to Thorbecke there was no politically inspired, undue influence of the government on elections or public administration.

Van Zuylen's questions and comments could not have come as a surprise as cronyism and political favouritism were increasingly openly condemned and were no longer formally commensurable with the liberal-bourgeois public values that had begun to dominate from 1848 onwards. Especially the behaviour of Maastricht mayor Pijls, appointed by Thorbecke, was discussed.<sup>82</sup> Pijls supported Liberal candidates during elections and continuously expressed his loyalty to Thorbecke. Furthermore, in a letter of 14 November 1865 Pijls wrote to Thorbecke that he did »his utmost« to support and inform Thorbecke about the Letters Affair and called himself Thorbecke's »most dedicated servant.«<sup>83</sup> It is hard to call this a rational and independent relationship between government and local officials.

The dignity or »credibility«, as it was called, of the political and administrative organization was also harmed by Betz, who did not consider influencing high level civil servants behind the scenes as a problem. In a letter of 26 November 1865 he explained to Thorbecke why he had ordered the director of the tax collection in Limburg to be more lenient. According to Betz there was a »private« and »backdoor« agreement between him and the director. Betz justified his actions by saying that these kinds of orders had been common in earlier years. He also wrote to Thorbecke that Limburgers had always been treated flexibly in matters of taxation. He saw no real problem in this course of action.<sup>84</sup>

80 HTK, 18 November 1865, p. 185.

81 Ibid., p. 188 (5–7).

82 Eric Lemmens, *Aan vorst en Vaderland gehecht doch tevreden zijn zij niet*, Limburgse politici in Den Haag 1839–1918, Amsterdam 2004, p. 201.

83 G. H. Pijls to Johan Rudolph Thorbecke (14 November 1865), National Archives The Hague, collection Thorbecke 2.21.161, nr. 347 »Concerning the land tax in Limburg and the resign of G. H. Betz October–December 1865«.

84 G. H. Betz to Johan Rudolph Thorbecke (26 November 1865), National Archives The Hague, collection Thorbecke 2.21.161, nr. 347 »Concerning the land tax in Limburg and the resignation of G. H. Betz October–December 1865«.

This explanation was kept under wraps by both Betz and Thorbecke, which indicates they knew it was »not done« to act like this.

#### 4.5 Increasing Tensions: General and Local Interests and the Mixing of Public and Private

In addition to the aforementioned difficulties there was a continuous debate on whether it was permitted to make an exception for a province in matters of tax regulation, not least because some of the Limburg delegates were still trying to prevent the tax revisions. J. P. J. A. van Zuylen, for instance, asked: »Is it constitutional to revive the old provincialism and to divide our country again in as many little countries with closed borders as there are provinces?« Here he states, in other words, how provincialism conflicts with the general interest and how it corrodes the national sphere.<sup>85</sup>

In the official setting of parliament there was little disagreement concerning the immorality of influencing elections and civil servants or about the impriety of Limburg receiving special treatment. Both Liberal and Conservative MPs disapproved. Liberal MP Beyma thoe Kingma, for example, was against the parliamentary enquiry suggested by Van Zuylen. Conservative MP Asch van Wijk was in favour, but both MPs agreed that elections and public administration should be without governmental influence. For this reason the opposition in Limburg did not have their sympathy.<sup>86</sup> Conservative MP W. Goldstein furthermore argued that »the people in Limburg must not think that the result of an election can influence the acceptance or withdrawal of a certain law proposal.«<sup>87</sup>

There was also debate about whether the Letters Affair was really a public concern. This point was brought up by Liberal MP Jonckbloet. The only evidence available, he said, was the letter written by Betz and the one by Thorbecke, which had been used by Van der Maesen as a confidential letter for »private use« and was not intended to influence the elections.<sup>88</sup> This view gained the support of other Liberal MPs, especially G. M. van der Linden. This close ally of Thorbecke pointed out that the letter was »not an official document« but »a private letter«, and that in his opinion »a private letter should not be discussed in public.«<sup>89</sup> In an earlier debate Thorbecke himself had similarly stated that Betz' remarks were »special conversations« between »two persons« who had a »private meeting.«<sup>90</sup> Furthermore, before Van der Maesen had resigned he had de-

85 HTK, 18 November 1865, p. 188.

86 Ibid., 14 November 1865, pp. 323 f., 329.

87 Ibid., 3 December 1865, p. 308.

88 Ibid., 11 December 1865, p. 323.

89 Ibid., 12 December 1865, p. 342 (1).

90 Ibid., 20 November 1865, p. 200 (3 and 4).

fended himself by pleading that Thorbecke's remarks were an 'ill-considered private conversation which had a totally different aim than influencing the election.'<sup>91</sup> The facts that Betz had on the one hand written about a government proposal and an agreement with the tax director, and on the other hand had sent this letter during election time, were both defended as 'private' by some Liberal politicians involved such as Van der Linden and Thorbecke.

In a reaction, Van Zuylen suggested and defended his proposal for a parliamentary enquiry. Although his opponents said there was no question of corruption, he went on to say that 'the reversal of the tax proposal was an excellent example of an instrument of corruption, because everybody knew exactly how much financial benefit it would deliver.'<sup>92</sup> Van Zuylen saw the withdrawal of the proposal as a form of bribery.<sup>93</sup> According to him it was a matter of 'political morality [and] it is for the sake of warning the country that actions committed here, and which I think earn disapproval, cannot pass unnoticed.'<sup>94</sup> He continued by saying that in order for Ministers to act 'respectfully' and 'honourably' they must not be harmed by 'suspicion' and 'distrust' which would make it impossible for them to govern. 'It is therefore necessary for the sake of the country and also for the Ministers, that the clearest light illuminate their behaviour.'<sup>95</sup> A parliamentary enquiry would have this effect, according to Van Zuylen.

Liberal MP Poortman opposed this view. He thought that an enquiry would only harm political and public morality further.<sup>96</sup> He received support from Jonckbloet who agreed that the matter was scandalous, but said that Betz had already resigned and there was no real evidence that Thorbecke was involved. As a result, however, it was not only the 'honour' of Thorbecke that was questioned but 'that of the whole country'. Jonckbloet was concerned about the effect the Letters Affair might have on the integrity and dignity of the Liberal leader and Prime Minister Thorbecke. According to Jonckbloet, Thorbecke could not be seen as a corrupt politician, because he was 'politically honest', 'unfaltering' and 'resolute' in his manner and appearance.<sup>97</sup> Liberal MP J. H. de Laet de Kanter also argued that these kinds of rumours were 'beneath the dignity' of both Thorbecke and the country. A parliamentary enquiry would only do more harm.<sup>98</sup> Apparently, the Liberals were very concerned about the image of politicians in general, and Thorbecke's in particular, with regard to integrity and ethical behaviour. In the end, Van Zuylen failed to convince parliament that besides Betz and Van der Maesen, Thorbecke was also involved. On the second day of debates his proposal for a parliamentary enquiry thus received 18 votes in fa-

vour and 53 against which meant that in the end Thorbecke's actual involvement could not be proven.

#### 4.6 Nineteenth-Century Political Corruption in a 'Johnstonian' Perspective

The Letters Affair shows how accusations of corruption are based on violations of norms and values as boundaries are crossed between the acceptable and the unacceptable. The case shows what can happen to the meaning of political corruption when acts and ideas are debated and contested. In the dominating Liberal value system after 1848, strictness, decency, openness, independence, and honour were important values for capable public officials. The letter by Betz was harmful to these Liberal values of correct administration – as decisions about taxes were not made in public, Limburg voters were allowed to have private gain and public officials could get away with not acting respectfully and honourably.

Perhaps the most damaging effect of the Letters Affair was that the 'general', i.e. national, interest was harmed. Whatever the general interest may have meant to these politicians, it was clear to all that it did at least mean the opposite of the private interests of individual provinces, civil servants and politicians. Thus, the Letters Affair in essence revolved around the issue of political representation. Even in a political election system based on districts and income politicians and state officials should serve and represent national instead of particular interests. The letter by Betz and the way Liberals tried to influence their position in Limburg therefore (ironically) violated 'their own' Liberal set of values. It was seen as 'corruption' mostly because the general interest was harmed by favouring Limburg. Finally, Thorbecke's role seems to have been especially important. He presented himself as the embodiment of the Liberal value system, which is why Liberals so vehemently defended his integrity and why Conservatives and others tried so hard to show that Thorbecke was not capable and even corrupt. An incapable or corrupt Thorbecke would, after all, discredit the entire Liberal system. An interesting note is that both Liberals and Conservatives agreed on the fact that the general interest was harmed. Also, in the end everybody felt the letter by Betz was inappropriate.

#### 5. Concluding Remarks

From Schrevelius and Van den Bergh and the early modern Dutch practice of the bestowal of office we have jumped to political corruption and the rise of a dominant, albeit already contested, Liberal value system in the 1850s and 1860s. Although the cases are seemingly worlds apart they are linked by our Johnstonian

91 Ibid., p. 192.

92 Ibid., 11 December 1865, pp. 339, 341.

93 Ibid., pp. 318 f.

94 Ibid., 12 December 1865, p. 339.

95 Ibid., 11 December 1865, pp. 320 f.

96 Ibid., p. 326.



nian approach. They show how and why political corruption actually acquires its meaning in relation to its social setting and historical context. In order for us to understand political corruption, these »thick description« cases are necessary. The cases also show how in certain periods behaviour which is initially considered to be normal is increasingly being questioned. We see how values pertaining to public office change, although such changes take a long time to become firmly rooted in ideological as well as practical settings. However, as noted earlier, any practical failure of reforms must not lead to the belief that we cannot speak of changing or shifting values. Obviously this kind of change is caused by a complex mix of political, economic and social causes which needs to be investigated thoroughly. This underscores the need for a flexible neo-classical approach to understanding corruption.

The cases also show interesting recurring elements related to political corruption, despite the considerable amount of time between them and the differences in context. We constantly see, firstly, conflicts regarding the appointment of public officials. Different criteria (rational or merit, political considerations, and appointments based on »tradition«) are found in both cases. Van den Bergh's appointment of Van der Mark as new sheriff instead of Schrevelius and the ensuing criticism were clearly based on politics and tradition. More rational criteria such as capability (being sensible, honest, friendly, devout etc.) do not seem to have been in play despite pleas from reformers. Criteria for appointing public officials also played an important part in our second case. Although the Liberals argued for rational criteria for appointments, Thorbecke's appointing of friends in senior positions was obviously also a matter of politics and tradition. Still, even though rational criteria and a truly »Weberian« civil service were yet to be realized, some increase in the importance attached to rational criteria can be seen here. There was considerable protest against practices that did not comply with these standards.

A second recurring theme in both cases is the common good or general interest that should be served by public officials, and the matter of public or private behaviour. In the early modern Dutch Republic, »common good« could mean anything from local to provincial interests. Groups of magistrates could justify their acts as defending their common good, just as protesters could argue for the sale of offices for the (provincial) common good. »General interest« acquired a different meaning in the dominant Liberal value system of the second half of the nineteenth century, when it came to denote »anything but« local and provincial interests. The formation of a nation state and the definitive end of the ancien régime placed an entire country at the core of the general interest. Now, individual interests should not be represented by national politicians and/or civil servants.

A third recurring element involves the, somewhat obvious, fact that corruption is often used as a tool (or, if you like, ammunition) in political strife. To a certain degree this is visible in both cases. In the case of Van den Bergh, faction

strife was inherently present in accusations of corruption. In the case of the Lettens Affair, accusations of corruption were used by Catholics and Conservatives alike as a stick with which to beat the Liberals. In the latter case, furthermore, corruption was essentially »party«-corruption and not (as in the case of Van den Bergh) »individual« corruption. However, true as the political use of corruption accusations may be, accusations of corruption only work in political infighting, if the practice a political adversary is accused of is actually seen as corruption by the wider public.

One final recurring element remains. Both cases involve attacks on dominant value systems which were, at least on the surface or in a practical sense, parried. Both cases show how new and/or different notions of correct public administrative conduct emerged which were as yet unable to convince or persevere. Still, changing thinking on values underlying public administration is an element we believe to be visible when aligning both cases. In a more structural sense the seeds of change were sown in both cases as old and new value systems or ideas on public administrative behaviour collided. Related to this is the fact that even though political corruption seems to be ever-changing and highly contextual, we believe that both case studies provide a preliminary view on a certain shift in the values underlying public administration and political corruption, despite the absence of clear-cut »practical« change. The first case displays a certain individual value pluralism inherent in the clashing notions of political corruption and correct public official behaviour. In the second case we see how pluralism has been encapsulated into a more coherent and dominant (although not uncontested) value system of a group of (mostly Liberal) politicians and civil servants. While these Liberal views on correct public official conduct and capabilities were already being contested due to political strife, we feel it is safe to say that the value pluralism of the eighteenth century was over.